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ABSTRACT

Using film making in the classroom can bring to life concepts that may seem abstract and offer thinking as well as decision making skills to the participants. To achieve this objective, a small group communication class was asked to make a movie about creativity. The 3-week project resulted in the writing, directing, filming, and editing of a movie titled "Recreating Creation" or "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Creation." The first week of the project was spent discussing the concepts to be used in the movie--in this case, the use of creativity in group problem solving. Then, the class was divided into groups to write a script capturing the creative process within groups. When filming began, the students encountered problems making the film, and subsequently it was decided to film a class discussion about creativity instead of the originally conceived plot. This served to place more emphasis on the process rather than the product, and allowed students to showcase what they had learned. Finally, since producing the movie proved to be an enormous job, the following ideas were developed to make such projects more manageable in the future: 1) use broadcasting students to help with filming and editing; 2) use this project in a 3-6 week course rather than a semester-long one so as not to lose momentum; 3) remember that the point is hands-on experience with material being presented in class; 4) let the students make decisions; 5) choose the method of evaluation in advance; and 6) avoid using this project with groups that don't "click" together. (PRA)

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FILMMAKING IN THE CLASSROOM
A BACKSTAGE APPROACH TO LEARNING

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presented at the Central States Communication Meeting.
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Offering students new avenues for learning can be challenging. As instructors, one of our goals is to help students develop critical thinking skills. It is also desirable to foster new ideas and to cultivate a sense of responsibility for their own learning. It is important to go beyond conventional attitudes toward learning and empower our students to think. Sometimes, in order to achieve this, we have to be willing to go beyond conventional teaching methods and try new approaches. Making a movie in the classroom is one such endeavor. Using film making in the classroom can, "bring to life" concepts that may seem abstract and offer thinking as well as decision making skills to the participants. This was my objective in assigning a small group communication class the project of "make a movie about creativity". Beyond this instruction students were on their own to complete the project. My goal of having them involved in a real activity that would engage them and allow them to "see" the processes they were approaching conceptually was more than achieved. This paper is a review of that project and the suggestions for future use of this method that grew out of the experience.

The entire project was completed in under three weeks. In that amount of time we wrote, directed, filmed and edited an hour long film titled "Recreating Creation" or "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Creation." The scene was Heaven; the time was before the creation of earth. The plot asked the question, what would happen if God decided to create the world with the help of his secretary and 24 very diverse angels? This is how it all happened.

Before beginning the project we spent a week discussing the concepts that were going to be used in the movie. For this particular class we were talking about the use of creativity in group problem solving. The premise revolved around the notion that groups tend to become "stuck" when approaching group problem solving situations thus a creative approach to problem solving could be useful for getting ideas moving again. The class was divided into groups of four or five to write a script that would capture the creative process within groups.

Each group presented it's ideas to the rest of the class who then voted on the script they liked best. It was interesting to watch them come to a decision. Most of the discussion centered around constraints such as time, resources and complexity of script. Any idea chosen needed to be low budget (or really no budget), able to be filmed in three hours and within the classroom. At this point the real work began.

The class had one week to develop and write the script. They were then faced with the task of pulling everything together and organizing the entire project. I had a conference to attend on the first day that they met. This probably was one of the better things that could have happened to the class. Because It forced them into taking charge of the movie. For the remainder of the project I played the role of motivator and saw myself as the person who kept ideas flowing. Decisions on all levels had to be made and it would have been easy as the instructor to become the "director" of such a large project.

Students chose group leaders to head up different committees such as props, making signs and writing a script. In order to show that every decision making group is made up of different attitudes and approaches they divided the Angels into five groups. The separate groups consisted of: the Radicals, the Nerds, the Intellectuals, the Negatives and the Abilenes. The groups represented stereotypes that exist within a decision making group. Each set of angles, depending on their name, approached each problem that God came to them with the "mind set" typical of that subgroup. For example, the radicals were always wanting God to try something outlandish while the negatives were sure nothing would work. Nerds were blamed for all the mistakes. The intellectuals were expected to have all the right answers while the Abilenes agreed to everything.

The third week was spent filming. My office mate filmed everything. He captured them putting on costumes, hanging posters, having fun, looking bored, being confused and working through each scene. The first day of filming was extremely productive; everyone was full of energy and offered tons of ideas. They freely entered into dialogue about how each concept would be best presented. However, by the the next class period, they had lost some of the momentum and it was harder to generate new ideas. Also, on the second day, they were more inclined to make decisions based on what was quickest and least complicated to execute.

Students were experiencing a burn-out with the project and when we discussed it later we came up with several reasons for this. One explanation was the sequence of filming days. The first day we filmed was on a Thursday it wasn't until the following Tuesday that we came together again. In five days students had forgotten ideas and it was hard for them to get back on track. A major reason for this had to do with the scope of making a film. None of us had any idea how much work actually went into even an amateur film. There was a feeling that the film wasn't going to be very good.

After discussing the concerns that my students were having with my office mate, we agreed that something needed to be added to the movie to give it a clearer focus. I was concerned that a movie about the creation of the earth wasn't capturing the real process that was going on. We knew that the real process of creativity had to do with the class making a movie and little to do with the concept of the film. It was at this point that I came up with the idea of filming a group discussion in which the class talked about everything that happened during the past three weeks. They talked about how they viewed creativity and how this project changed their notions of what creativity was. They shared with each other how their perceptions of group members changed as they watched rather quiet people say and do some of the funniest things. We filmed an hour and a half of discussion and this changed the purpose and focus of the film.

Instead of it being a movie about the creation of the world it now centered around the making of a film in a small group class. The emphasis was then on the process not the product. The discussion allowed them to showcase what they had learned which, of course, was the purpose of the project.

My work started at this point. Joe Thatcher, a student from class, was also a broadcast major and he agreed to help me with the editing of the film. The day before we met to edit I sat down with all the footage and made decisions concerning the sequence of events and choose sections of the class discussion to build around.

For example, I decided to begin the film with a discussion centered around what creativity is and could creativity be taught. I then chose footage that captured people trying out different ideas about how to approach a scene. Having a clear purpose with the movie focused the editing. This process took about seven hours to complete. By our estimation we put in close to sixteen hours of editing time.

There is no doubt that making an hour long movie is a big endeavor for everyone involved. I spent close to 25 hours outside of class organizing, viewing, editing and discussing the film. With that in mind, here are a few suggestions that would make this project more manageable.

1. Contact the broadcasting area and ask for at least two students that would be interested in receiving credit. You will want to make sure that one of them has experience with editing and that both have experience filming. Expect to spend several hours organizing and coordinating with these students and make sure that you and them have the same "vision".

2. If you're teaching more than one section of a course in a given semester this is not the project to use in that particular course. Wait until you only have one section. However, if you're teaching a course in a condensed format (a three week or six week course) this project would work well. One of the problems that I mentioned earlier was that students lost momentum between Thursdays shooting and the following Tuesdays shooting. When we discussed it later they felt that too much time had passed between filmings. Actually, it was the classes idea to use this project in a three or six week course.

3. The goal of this project is to create an opportunity for students to receive hands on experience with the material being presented in class. To achieve this you can try a variety of strategies. For example, choose three to five axioms from the text and tell them that their job is to write a script that incorporates all five. They could interview couples and combine the interviews with vignettes that they perform in class. Whatever you decide keep in mind that the most important part of the project is filming them talking about what they learned.

4. Don't be afraid to let them make decisions. Perhaps even approach them with the idea that you want to make a film and ask them for suggestions about the purpose of the film. Let them decide who the audience should be or what concepts should be included. The more they get involved in the decision making the greater the chances that they will feel ownership and the less you will have to do.

5. Decide in advance how you are going to evaluate this project. One suggestion may be to have each person write a paper. Perhaps have them analyze how well they functioned as a group. In an interpersonal course they might want to focus on types of relationships they developed or interpersonal conflict that they experienced and how they worked through it. In a small group class they can write about small group decision making and the variables related to it.

4. This project isn't for all classes. Class dynamics play a large role in making a film successful. People within the course need to have come together as a class. They should feel a sense of commitment to each other and be willing to take some responsibility for their learning experience. There are times however, when classes just don't "click", and I'm not sure that this is the project to try to pull people together. The project is too demanding of their time and there needs to be some faith in the worthiness of such a large undertaking.

Sometimes when a class knows early in the semester that they are going to be involved in a major project it can be the catalyst for establishing a supportive climate. There are risks involved either way. However, as the instructor, if you are sold on the idea and believe in the abilities of class to pull it off I feel they will follow your lead.

From my experiences with working and exploring creativity and learning with others I have come to the conclusion that positive things emerge from such activities. I believe that we all want and need to feel creative. When it happens we develop a stronger sense of who we are. In essence, we feel good. The laws of nature suggest that energy produces energy. Creative thought is energy fueled by those around us as well as from within us. Also, when people receive the right "tools" creative potential can be realized. I feel this project supported that idea. The movie that the class produced is more intricate and full than anything a single individual could have conceptualized. Students left the class viewing themselves differently than when they had entered it. More importantly, they incorporated the concepts from the film into their world view. When students are engaged in a learning process they discover much more about themselves and those around them. Any medium that fosters such learning is worth the time and effort.

Good Luck!

OUR CREATION :
AN EXCURSION IN APPLYING CREATIVITY

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STAFF MEETING:

1. Update on videotaping weekend:
 - number of withdrawals,
 - retaping schedule,
 - suggested modifications for next semester
2. CLAS testing printout confusion
3. Goal statement on motivated sequence speech outline
4. Speech hit list
5. Office hours--turn in list to me
6. Class observations--everyone
7. PROBLEMS???